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ABSTRACT

This study examined the possibility of a "threshold" of parent involvement with their children's preschools, that can lead to positive child outcomes in a sample of hard-to-engage families. Three cohorts of preschool children were studied, most from low-income, single-parent families. Teachers were interviewed to determine extent of contact they had with each child's parent(s). A global measure (yes/no) of parent involvement was used; categories of contact included parent-teacher conference, home visit by teacher, extended class visit by parent, and parental help with class activity. Two groups of children were formed based upon low or high parent-teacher contact. Measurement was made of children's development in four domains (communication, daily living skills, socialization, and motor) and of mastery in four basic skill areas (verbal, math/science, social/work habits, and physical). Because no significant cohort differences in parent involvement were found, further analyses combined cohorts. Results showed that parent involvement did not differ based on child's sex, single-versus two-parent family structure, or income level. Head Start parents were significantly more involved than parents of children in prekindergarten programs. After controlling for socioeconomic status, increased parent involvement had a positive impact on preschoolers' early development and mastery of basic skills. In addition, the study found that a minimal amount of involvement is needed to affect children's academic and developmental progress, because behavior categorized in the study as "high" involvement was a small increment over no involvement. (Contains 8 references.) (EV)

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Impact of Parent Involvement on Children's Development and Academic Performance: A Three-Cohort Study

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Impact of Parent Involvement on Children's Development and Academic Performance: A Three-Cohort Study

Assessing the impact of parent involvement on children's developmental and academic outcomes is somewhat difficult due to varying definitions of what constitutes involvement and lack of agreement on how to best measure such involvement. While early intervention efficacy literature typically cites the positive impact of parent involvement on student outcomes (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce, & Snipper, 1981), research has not consistently supported this belief. In a review of programs whose primary focus was to use parents as interveners with their child, White, Taylor, and Moss (1992) found few effects. They concluded that substantially greater involvement than is now typically available is necessary to accomplish the types of benefits that many people have claimed to be associated with parent involvement. However, for many American families additional involvement is not possible, and the value of engaging parents at different levels such as Comer and Haynes (1991) did in their "parent-school fit model" needs to be further examined. This is especially important for families whose children are at-increased-risk for learning problems and school failure due to socioeconomic factors. Parker, Piotrkowski, Kessler-Sklar, Baker, Peay, and Clark's (1997) study of Head Start parents in New York City found a substantial number were "hard to engage." Welfare reform further complicates the issue because as self-sufficiency activity demands increase, time for parent involvement decreases. It is, therefore, important to explore whether an optimal level of involvement exists. Is there a threshold of involvement that can lead to positive child outcomes? And if so, how much involvement is "enough" to

warrant investment of limited parent resources? The present study examined the possibility of such a "threshold" in a sample of families that is, for a number of reasons, generally "hard to engage."

Method

Data were collected in 49 public schools from 62 teachers of 708 randomly selected preschoolers (M age = 58.6 months) enrolled in pre-kindergarten (84%) or Head Start (16%) programs in a major urban school system. The sample was 51% female and 95% African American. Most children (69%) qualified for subsidized school lunch (based upon low family income), and 60% lived in single-parent families. Three cohorts of children were studied, with cohort A comprising 43% of the sample, and replication cohorts B and C representing 32% and 25% respectively.

Teachers were interviewed to determine extent of contact they had with each child's parent(s). A global measure (yes/no) of parent involvement was used because global ratings are more likely to be accurate for school involvement observed over the course of a school year (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1982). Categories of contact included parent-teacher conference, home visit by teacher, extended class visit by parent, and parental help with class activity. Two groups of children were formed based upon low (0 or 1 category fulfilled) or high (3 or 4 categories fulfilled) parent-teacher contact.

The Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale - Classroom Edition (Sparrow, Balla, & Cicchetti, 1985) was used as a standardized measure of development in four domains: Communication (receptive, expressive, and written); Daily Living Skills (personal, domestic, and community); Socialization (interpersonal, play/leisure, and coping); Motor

(gross and fine). A composite adaptive behavior score (M = 100, SD = 15) was also derived. The school district's Early Childhood Progress Report was used to assess mastery of basic skills in four areas: Verbal (prereading, literature, and listening), Math/Science, Social/Work Habits, and Physical. An overall grade point average (GPA) was calculated for each child using a 3-point scale (3 = mastery, 2 = progressing towards mastery, 1 = needs help). Teachers completed these measures at the end of the school year.

Results

Because no significant cohort differences in parent involvement were found, further analyses combined cohorts. Parents of boys were as likely as parents of girls to be involved, and single-parent families were as involved as two-parent families. Involvement of poorer families (qualified for lunch subsidies) was not significantly different from that of more affluent families. However, Head Start parents were significantly more involved than were parents whose children attended Pre-K χ^2 (1, N = 517) = 78.82, $p < .001$. Parents of children who attended preschools using a child-initiated approach were significantly more involved than parents whose children attended didactic, academically-directed preschools χ^2 (2, N = 517) = 24.95, $p < .001$.

Although family SES (based on subsidized lunch status) did not significantly impact parent involvement, it does influence school achievement (e.g., Schultz, 1993). Subsequent analysis of developmental and academic data used a covariate (eligibility for subsidized lunch) to control for economic differences between children.

As reported in Table 1, the high involvement group had a significantly higher Vineland composite score and MANCOVA indicated significantly higher development

[Wilks' $\lambda = .9623$, $F\ (4, 455) = 4.46$, $p < .01$] in the communication, daily living, and motor domains, with a trend ($p < .10$) toward higher social development. The high

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Insert Table 1 about here

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involvement group scored higher in all Vineland subdomains except written language and play/leisure skills. These differences were statistically significant for receptive language ($p < .01$), personal ($p < .001$), and community skills ($p < .01$). A trend was also found for higher Vineland fine motor skills ($p < .06$). Mastery of basic skills was greater for the high parent involvement group in all areas assessed by the Progress Report. Overall grade point average (GPA) was significantly higher and MANCOVA indicated significantly greater skills mastery (Wilks' $\lambda = .9706$, $F\ (4, 434) = 3.29$, $p = .01$) in verbal and social/work habits. A trend was found for higher math/science skills ($p = .06$).

Discussion

Increased parent involvement had a positive impact on preschoolers' early development and mastery of basic skills needed for future school success. The exact mechanisms of this notable influence are unclear, making it difficult to determine whether teacher perceptions or actual child changes or some unidentified third variables are the source of higher ratings of children whose parents are more involved. It is possible that teachers rated children higher as a result of familiarity with parents who appeared to be more interested in their children's education. Such parent interest may have influenced teachers' willingness to work with children, resulting in an enriched school experience for

those in the high parent involvement group. Enriched school experiences may have, in turn, enhanced children's sense of accomplishment, and produced greater progress than would have occurred with a lesser degree of teacher involvement. Children's progress could have encouraged parents and led to further interactions between the home and school.

Of special note in this study's findings is the minimal amount of involvement needed to affect children's academic and developmental progress. What is deemed to be "high" involvement is actually just a small increment over no involvement. In this school district a parent-teacher conference was required in order to receive a child's report card, yet almost 1 in 5 children in this sample had parents who had not participated in such a conference. In this study, the low involvement group was truly non-involved with their children's school. In an at-risk population of children, the lack of contact between home and school signals an additional risk factor, and provides a strong indicator of the need for increased intervention efforts. If there is a "threshold" for parent involvement, these data suggest it is very low. Getting parents to do just "a bit more than nothing" can have a significant impact on young children's development and academic performance.

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Table 1

Mean Vineland and Progress Report Scores (means adjusted for covariate)

Measure		Parent Involvement High	Parent Involvement Low	ANCOVA
Vineland Adaptive Behavior				
Composite	M	103.17	98.11	$F(1, 459) = 14.05, p < .001$
	SD	(14.83)	(14.47)	
Communication	M	103.54	100.26	$F(1, 458) = 3.85, p = .05$
	SD	(17.86)	(18.96)	
Daily Living Skills	M	103.91	98.60	$F(1, 458) = 15.75, p < .001$
	SD	(14.64)	(14.19)	
Socialization	M	96.20	94.10	$F(1, 458) = 2.86, p = .09$
	SD	(11.47)	(14.85)	
Motor	M	106.55	101.80	$F(1, 458) = 9.50, p < .01$
	SD	(16.46)	(16.63)	
Progress Report				
Overall GPA	M	2.68	2.59	$F(1, 460) = 7.44, p < .01$
	SD	(.36)	(.30)	
Math/Science	M	2.54	2.47	$F(1, 437) = 3.46, p = .06$
	SD	(.39)	(.45)	
Verbal	M	2.73	2.63	$F(1, 437) = 8.76, p < .01$
	SD	(.31)	(.38)	
Social/Work Habits	M	2.78	2.68	$F(1, 437) = 9.24, p < .01$
	SD	(.27)	(.36)	
Physical	M	2.70	2.65	$F(1, 437) = 2.01, p = .16$
	SD	(.36)	(.40)	

Note. Means adjusted for covariate. Vineland standard scores have a M = 100 and SD = 15. Overall grade point average (GPA) and Progress Report subject area scores could range from 1.00 to 3.00, with higher scores indicative of greater skill mastery.